

## POLL: Study calling for later high school start times fuels debate in Collier, Lee

By KATHERINE ALBERS

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NAPLES — Barron Collier High School senior Melissa Perez used to give herself a pep talk during her Advanced Placement English class.

"I had it first period. I would say to myself, 'Mel, be awake. Be awake,'" the 17-year-old said.

It wasn't that the class was boring, it was that it was early, she said, adding that many of her peers drank coffee to keep them going in the morning.

"I think we should go to school at the middle school time," she said, referring to Collier County's middle schools, most of which start at 9:05 a.m. "That's just my personal opinion."

A new study on teenagers and sleep finds that Melissa might be on to something.

The study, published earlier this month, found that teenagers who started school 30 minutes later are more likely to be alert and motivated — and less likely to be annoyed, irritated or depressed.

The study, which appeared in the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, found that beginning in adolescence, kids have what's called a delayed sleep phase. This means they start sleep later and sleep longer in the morning. The researchers found that adolescents need plenty of sleep, about 9.25 hours each night.

The researchers evaluated 201 Rhode Island high school students whose schools had pushed back the 8 a.m. start time to 8:30 a.m. The students completed a sleep-habits survey before and after the change.

With the delayed start, more students said they felt motivated in class. Researchers found that the kids slept better on weeknights, got up earlier on weekends and the percentage of students who said they got at least eight hours of sleep a night jumped from 16 percent to 55 percent.

But the best news for parents and teachers could be that the percentage of students who said they were annoyed or irritated during the day dropped from 84 percent to 62 percent.

Before the study, teachers, coaches and administrators all resisted the later start, according to the study. After, nearly all voted to keep it in place.

All Lee County high schools start at 7:15 a.m. Collier County high schools start at

7:10 a.m. with the exception of Lorenzo Walker Technical High School, where classes begin at 7:15 a.m., and Everglades City School, where classes begin at 8:15 a.m.

Lee County schools spokesman Joe Donzelli said those start times are common throughout Florida and the rest of the nation. In Lee County, he said, they aren't likely to change soon.

"It all comes down to scheduling. If all we were was a high school district, it would be easy," he said. "When you have high schools start later, every other school starts later. You have middle schools that are not out until 5 in the evening. That is not conducive to families."

Donzelli said unless society decides schools could run later into the afternoon or evening or that the school day should be shorter and there should be more of them to accommodate the required number of hours students need to be in class, change won't happen.

"You can't do something on the front end and not expect to do something on the back end," he said. "You might think it is only an hour, but when you're talking 80,000-plus students and 114 schools, it is quick to see that hour spread across the district will have a dramatic affect."

Furthermore, Donzelli said, the district's transportation system is one in tiers. So, for example, a bus driver could drop students at Cypress Lake High School and then have another route for an elementary or middle school.

In Collier, the district's Chief Academic Officer Martha Hayes said the district isn't opposed to changing the high school start time, but said the initiative would have to come from the community.

"It has reconfirmed what other studies have said," she said of the Rhode Island study. "However, there are trade-offs. If you start high school students later and elementary school students earlier, for example, you will have elementary students standing out at bus stops in the dark."

Hayes said while she doesn't doubt that the study has merit, the district ultimately has to weigh what's best for the student against what's best for the family dynamic.

Some Collier County students said they can see the value of keeping the high school start times as they are.

"Getting up at 5 a.m. is not the way I want to start my day, but getting home at 2:30 is nice," said Barron Collier High School sophomore Elizabeth Lepore, 15. "I have time to do my homework and we get a lot of it."

Barron Collier High junior Nick Bajema, 16, said getting out of school earlier allows him to fit a job into his schedule.

"Sleep-wise would I like school to start later? Yes," he said. "But I would rather go earlier and be able to work."

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